

Washington, DC – Today, the House voted to pass legislation authored by Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) to mandate the treatment of autistic children of service personnel under the military's healthcare program (TRICARE). The legislation, which was included as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, is the successful culmination of a two year effort led by Congressman Sestak to provide treatment for the 13,000 autistic children of military personnel and will serve as a model for similar federal and state efforts.

"With this bill's passage, we have supported the critical needs of many military families and addressed the growing epidemic of autism among children of both military and civilian families. It is unacceptable that 1 in 84 military families are reported to have a child with autism, but receive less than 16 of the 25 minimum recommended hours of therapy," said Congressman Sestak, a member of the House Armed Services Committee and the highest ranking Veteran in Congress.

Under current law, the military's Extended Care Health Option provides limited coverage to military families afflicted by autism. Only five percent of eligible military children receive care because of excessive delays-- as long as two year waiting periods-- and arbitrary coverage denials. The amendment passed today will work to fix these problems by:

Mandating coverage of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) under TRICARE. Treatment is currently provided through TRICARE's marginalized ECHO (Extended Care Health Option) program.

Requiring that treatment of ASDs be provided only if a health care professional determines that the treatment is medically necessary

Ensuring that beneficiaries under the age of 5 who have developmental delays and are at risk for Autism may not be denied access to treatment if treatment is medically necessary.

Requiring the Secretary of Defense to ensure that authorized providers of applied behavior analysis or other structured behavior programs are licensed or certified by a state, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board, or other accredited national certification board.

Requiring the Secretary of Defense to ensure that all employees or subcontractors of authorized providers are also certified and meet minimum qualification standards.

Quickly enacting the provisions 180 days after passage.

Autism is a disease that strikes 1 in every 150 American children, and is more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. A new case is diagnosed every 20 minutes, making it the fastest-growing serious developmental disease in the United States. If this escalating trend continues, the prevalence of autism could reach some 4 million Americans within the next decade.

Congressman Joe Sestak entered politics specifically due to his concerns about healthcare for our nation's children, and has taken a special interest in autism. Since taking office, he has

regularly visited facilities for autistic children throughout his District, including the Milagre School, the Child Guidance Resource Center and Carelink. Last year, he was successful in placing an amendment into the House-passed version of the National Defense Authorization Act that enhanced funding and research for autism for military families by increasing it by 100 percent.

"We cannot allow our children with autism to be shortchanged. With access to the right, medically-necessary, evidence-based therapies, like Applied Behavioral Analysis, these children can make incredible gains, reach their potential, and become contributing members of our society," said the Congressman.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.